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TAMIL-BRAHMI INSCRIPTIONS OF THE SANGAM AGE

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Introduction

This Paper presents briefly the important results obtained on the basis of my revised readings of the Tamil Inscriptions in the Brahmi Script discovered so far (1966) in the natural caverns within the Tamil Country. The revised readings are based upon my study *in situ* of all the inscriptions, direct tracings from the rocks, fresh estampages kindly supplied by the Government Epigraphist for India and direct photographs. The source-material for the Paper is my *Corpus of the Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions*, which brings together 76 inscriptions from 21 sites, about half of them previously unpublished.

It shall be my endeavour to establish that when the Tamil-Brahmi Texts are read in accordance with the principles of orthography enunciated in this Paper, the texts emerge in simple and intelligible Tamil with but a small proportion of Prakrt loan-words (mostly proper names and religious terms). I have also drawn important conclusions regarding the Chronology of the Sangam Age, Early Tamil Grammar, and the social, economic and political conditions of the times in the Tamil Country, on the basis of a critical analysis of the contents of the inscriptions.

Discovery and Publication of the Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions

The first discovery of an inscription in the Brahmi script within the Tamil Country was made in 1903 by Venkoba Rao in a natural cavern at Kilavalavu, a village 23 miles north-east of Madurai. Three

years later, L. A. Cammiade discovered another Brahmi inscription at Marukaltalai, 10 miles from Tirunelveli.

The occurrence of Brahmi inscriptions within the Tamil Country, which was previously unsuspected, aroused great interest among the scholars and a systematic search was made to discover more of them. We know now of the existence of 76 rock-inscriptions in the Tamil-Brahmi Script from 21 sites within the Tamil Country. A complete List of these Inscriptions with necessary references is given in the *Corpus*. We also have about 20 short graffiti in the same characters on potsherds excavated at Arikamedu[2]. It will be seen from the sequel that, while the material at hand cannot be called abundant, its importance to the study of early Tamil language and history is out of all proportion to its volume.

Earlier Readings of the Tamil-Brahmi Epigraphs

The first serious attempt to tackle these inscriptions was made by H. K. Sastri in his Paper presented before the First Oriental Conference in 1919[3]. He published in this Paper his readings of 32 inscriptions selected from eleven sites. He did not attempt any interpretation of the texts except to offer some tentative suggestions on a few of the terms occurring in his readings. He classified some of the terms into two groups, labelling one of them as "the Dravidian element" and the other as "the Prakrt element". The utmost he would go was to declare that some words in the inscriptions were "apparently Tamil". His failure to recognise the symbols for the Tamil characters *zh*, *t* and *n* has seriously affected his readings. He did not notice the curious interchange in the values of *i* and *ii*. Thus even simple Tamil words like *iizha* and *maatan* assumed in his readings such strange forms as *ija* and *maaThunhaa* respectively resulting in a total loss of meaning.

The first breakthrough to an understanding of the real nature of these inscriptions came when K. V. Subrahmanya Ayyar presented his brilliant Paper "The earliest monuments of the Pandya Country and their inscriptions" before the Third Oriental Conference held at Madras in 1924[4]. The Paper deals with 31 inscriptions from 12

sites. It is on the basis of the readings contained in this Paper that much of the subsequent linguistic analysis of the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions has been carried out. However the importance of the Paper does not lie in the readings and interpretations proposed by K. V. S. Ayyar, many of which are incorrect. The real achievements of K. V. S. Ayyar are his elucidation of the nature of the language of the inscriptions and his successful determination of the phonetic values of the new symbols found in the script. It was K. V. S. Ayyar who first pointed out that as the script of these inscriptions lacks voiced plosives and aspirates (with rate exceptions confined to loan-words), the language used in them could only be Tamil, even though it contains an admixture of Prakrt words. That this view is basically right is no longer disputed. It was again K. V. S. Ayyar who determined the phonetic values of the new symbols for *zh*, *lh*, *t* and *n* occurring in these inscriptions. This is a feat which places him in the front rank of palaeographers along with Prinsep and Buhler.

The fact that the decipherments by K. V. Subrahmanya Ayyar were not however wholly successful in spite of his correct recognition of the nature of the language and his successful determination of the values of the special Tamil characters calls for some explanation. In the first place, it appears to me, judging from his numerous misreadings, that his labours were based upon unsatisfactory estampages. Secondly, even though he determined the values of *zh* and *t* correctly, he failed to recognise the earlier forms of these two letters and frequently misread *t* as *T* or *d* and *zh* as *Th* or *t* (thus *kuTu* for *kuta*, *eThuyaruur* for *ezhai-y-uur* etc.). Thirdly, many Tamil words were taken by him to be in Prakrt (*Ce-i-ya*, a verbal participle, was taken to mean *Caithya*). Above all, he did not grasp, owing to the inadequacy of the material before him, the true principles of orthography governing the earlier inscriptions. Thus his conclusion that the 'penultimate vowel' in a word got 'lengthened' is an imperfect generalisation of an altogether different rule, viz., that a consonantal symbol represented only the basic consonant and required a medial sign to express the medial vowel *a*. However his broad conclusions about the nature of the script and the language remain valid and constitute the real point of departure for all future work in the field.

Earlier views on the language of the Inscriptions

The views held by scholars as to the nature of the language of these inscriptions may be divided into three schools of thought which are briefly noticed below :

Earliest known written Tamil.—K. V. S. Ayyar arrived at the conclusion that the language of these inscriptions could only be Tamil on the basis of an analysis of its phonetic system and lexical material. The absence of the voiced plosives, aspirates and sibilants (with minor exceptions in loan-words) and the presence of the characteristic Tamil sounds *zh, lh, t* and *n* and Tamil verbal forms can leave no reasonable doubt that the language of these inscriptions is Tamil. The occurrence of Prakrt loan-words makes no difference to this basic fact.

A form of Prakrt.—C. Narayana Rao[5] denied that the language of these inscriptions was Tamil on the grounds that records in the Brahmi script could only be in the Prakrt and that Prakrt grammatical forms could not occur along with those of Tamil. There is however no necessary link between a language and its script. It is not also correct to say that Prakrt 'grammatical forms' occur in these inscriptions. The correct position is that the vocabulary of these inscriptions contains some Prakrt nouns, which is not surprising considering the religious context of the inscriptions in the caverns. The views of C. Narayana Rao that these epigraphs "contain a form of Prakrt described by the Prakrt grammarians as paisaci" and that "the Pandya country, according to these grammarians, is a tract where the prevailing language is paisaci" are too fantastic to merit any serious consideration.

A hybrid jargon of Tamil and Prakrt.—K. K. Pillai[6] was the first scholar to propound this view. He has stated that these votive inscriptions are in a hybrid language" containing Tamil as well as Prakrt words, which are found together in a "strange jumble". The verbal forms seem to be in Archaic Tamil but the inscriptions are "dominated by the Prakrt element". Kamil Zvelebil[7] undertook a lexical and grammatical analysis of the published readings of these inscriptions and came to the conclusion that while the grammatical forms in the records are Tamil, the language itself is a jumble of Prakrt

and Tamil forms and represents "a strongly hybridised Tamil, an epigraphical jargon of Buddhist bhikkus and/or Jaina munis". T. P. Meenakshisundaram[8] has also taken the same view. It is difficult to disturb the well-considered conclusions arrived at by such eminent scholars. However my objection to their view is fundamental. The theory that the language of the inscriptions is a "hybrid jargon" of Tamil and Prakrt is based upon a linguistic analysis of the published readings of H. K. Sastri and K. V. S. Ayyar. As I have pointed out earlier, their readings do contain serious errors producing an apparent jumble of words. I maintain that when correct readings are adopted, much of the strangeness of the texts will disappear along with the supposed dominance of the Prakrt element.

Present method of study

I took up the study of the Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions in 1961 at the instance of Prof. K. A. Nilakantha Sastri. The Government Epigraphist of India was kind enough to place at my disposal the estampages of the inscriptions. I, however, realised that it was not possible to decipher the inscriptions from the estampages alone and much less from their photographs. The earlier attempts at decipherments were unsuccessful mainly due to the unsatisfactory nature of the estampages. This is also the reason why many of the important inscriptions in the collection have remained unpublished and even unnoticed. Thus the Mangulam Grants of NheTunjcezhiyan (No. 1 & 2) and the Pukalur Grants of Koo Aathan Cellirumpotai (No. 56 & 57), which are undoubtedly the most important epigraphical discoveries in Tamil in the present century, remained unpublished even though they were discovered in 1906 and 1927 respectively.

I therefore decided to begin at the beginning by visiting each cavern to study and copy every inscription *in situ*. I studied the inscriptions at close quarters using ladders and scaffoldings. The inscriptions were also traced by placing rolls of tracing papers directly on the rock surfaces. My revised readings are based upon my study *in situ* of the inscriptions and direct tracings as well as the fresh estampages supplied by the Government Epigraphist for India and some direct photographs furnished by the Director of Archæology, Madras. I am deeply grateful to them for this valuable assistance.

Brief Results of the present study

The important findings and results of the present study may be summarised briefly under the following heads :

1. *The Script :*
   - (i) Origin and evolution of the Tamil-Brahmi script.
   - (ii) The special palæographical features of the script.
   - (iii) The special orthographical systems of the script.
   - (iv) Chronology of the inscriptions.

2. *The Language* : Grammar of the language of the Tamil-Brahmi Texts :
   - (i) phonology
   - (ii) morphology
   - (iii) lexical analysis

3. *The Contents :*

   Political, economic, religious and social conditions of the times in the Tamil country as gathered from the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions.

Note.—The inscriptions are referred to by their serial numbers assigned to them in the *Corpus*.

The Script : palæography

Nomenclature.—The script of these inscriptions may be called the Tamil-Brahmi, as it is an adaptation of the Brahmi script for writing down the Tamil language. The ancient names *Dravidi* or *Damili* found in the lists of scripts given in the Jaina Sutras, *Samavayanga-Sutra* and *Pannavana-Sutra* and in the Buddhist *Lalitavistara* most probably referred to this script, though Buhler identified them with the related variety found at Bhattiprolu[9].

Origin of the Script.—The letters of the Tamil-Brahmi script, subject to the modifications to be noticed presently, are practically identical with those of the Southern variety of the Mauryan Brahmi script found in the Asokan edicts at Siddhapura, Yerragudi, Brahmagiri, Maski and other places in the South[10]. The Buddhist context

of the earliest Tamil cave inscriptions and the related casket inscriptions at Bhattiprolu indicates that the Brahmi script reached these areas along with the southward spread of Buddhism during or immediately after the reign of Asoka. The Tamil-Brahmi script, which has been adapted to the phonetic system of Tamil, is a further development which should be dated in the immediate post-Asokan era, most probably, sometime in the Second Century B.C.

Provenance in the Tamil Country.—A study of the distribution of the inscriptions within the Tamil Country is quite rewarding (see Map in the *Corpus*). As many as 16 out of the total of 21 sites with cave inscriptions are found within the Pandyan territory. All the earlier inscriptions also come from this area. This evidence clearly indicates that the Tamil-Brahmi script was evolved in the Pandyan kingdom. The script however rapidly spread to the other parts of the Tamil Country within the first centuries of the Christian Era as indicated by the later inscriptions near Kanchipuram in the north, Arikamedu on the east coast and Karur on the west. It is sometimes supposed that the use of the Tamil-Brahmi script was confined to the Buddhist or Jaina caverns. This is not so. The inscribed potsherds from Arikamedu and Uraiyur prove that even ordinary people, at least in the urban and commercial centres, were acquainted with the script and used it for their daily transctions.

Adaptation from Brahmi.—The Tamil-Brahmi script is an adaptation of the Brahmi script to the Tamil phonetic system. The adaptation consists of,

(1) *Omission* of symbols representing sounds not found in Tamil, viz., the semi-vowels *r* and *l*, the *anusvara* and the *visarga*, voiced plosives, aspirates (except *dh* in the Prakrt loan-word *dhammam*) and the sibilants (except *s* in Prakrt loan-words);

(2) *Addition* of new symbols to represent sounds peculiar to Tamil, viz., *zh*, *lh*, *t* and *n*.

(3) *Orthographical modifications :* viz.,

(a) Use of the consonantal symbol to represent the basic consonant;

(*b*) Use of a medial sign for the medial vowel *a*, which was not considered 'inherent' in the consonant in the earlier inscriptions; and

(*c*) Avoidance of ligatures.

Inventory of symbols.—A complete inventory of the graphemes and the medial signs occuring in the Tamil-Brahmi script is given below. These are illustrated in Fig. 1.

VOWELS:

Initial (full):

a, aa, i, ii, u, uu, e/ee, ai, o/oo; (9)

Medial:

a/aa, i, ii, u, uu, e/ee, ai, o/oo (8)

Consonants:

Tamil: k, ng, c, nj, T, N, th, nh, p, m, y, r, l, v, zh, lh, t, n; (18)

Prakrt: (in loan-words) *dh, s*; (2)

Total number of letters	29
Medial signs	8

Note: (1) *ng* does occur, though the published Tables of the Script do not include the letter, e.g., *cengkuviiran* (No. 15)

(2) *Th* does not occur in the Script. What has been misread as *Th* is really the older form of *zh*; e.g., *kumuzh-uur* (No. 27), *ezhai-y-uur* (No. 28)

(3) *dh* occurs only twice and *s* only 9 times. No other Non-Tamil grapheme occurs in the cave inscriptions.

Palaeography of the Script.—The special palaeographical features of the Tamil-Brahmi script may be summarised as follows:

(1) VOWELS:

(i) *i* symbol: The *i* symbol (a vertical stroks with a dot or a small circle on either side) is first met with in Tamil-Brahmi but is not unique to this script. It also occurs in the Satavahana and the kshatrapa inscriptions in the 2nd. Cent. A.D., Vakataka inscriptions in the

4th Century and in the Gupta inscriptions in the 5th Century. However in all the latter cases, the symbol has the longer value (*ii*). A study of its occurrence in time and space indicates that the symbol originated in the South (probably in the Tamil country where it is met with first) and then spread northwards and to Ceylon.

(ii) Interchange in the values of *i* and *ii* symbols : A peculiar feature of the earlier Tamil-Brahmi script is the inter-change in the phonetic values of the symbols *i* and *ii*. The symbol consisting of three dots or small dashes arranged in a triangular pattern stands for *i* in the Brahmi script, but denotes *ii* in the earlier Tamil-Brahmi script (*e.g.*, *iizha* in No. 51). The symbol assumes its normal value in a later inscription (*e.g.*, *iva* in No. 55). Similarly the symbol consisting a vertical stroke with a dot on either side represents the short *i* in all the earlier inscriptions. (*e.g.*, *itha* in No. 2). This peculiarity is also shared by the earlier Brahmi script in Ceylon. Though we have no example, the symbol must have assumed the longer value subsequently, as the *ii* of vatteluttu and Tamil scripts are clearly derived from it.

(2) MEDIAL VOWEL SIGNS :

(i) *a* medial sing : A distinctive feature of the earlier Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions is the use of the *aa* medial sign (a short horizontal stroke attached to the top right of a consonant) to denote the *a* medial vowel also, which is not considered ' inherent ' in a consonant. The special *aa* medial sign of the Bhattiprolu script is not found in the Tamil-Brahmi script. The medial vowel signs for *a* and *aa* are identical and can be distinguished only from the context.

(ii) medial sings for *e/ee* and *o/oo* : The Tamil-Brahmi script does not distinguish between the short and long *e* and *o* respectively, a clear indication of the source of borrowing.

(3) CONSONANTS :

(i) Basic consonants : One of the most distinctive features of the earlier Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions is that a consonantal symbol, unaccompanied by a medial vowel sign, is to be taken to represent a basic consonant. In the later Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, a consonantal symbol is either basic or has an inherent *a* in it depending upon the context.

(ii) Special form of *m* : In the Tamil-Brahmi script, *m* has a special form which looks like a 'U' with a cross-bar between the arms. This form is also found in the earlier Brahmi inscriptions in Ceylon.

(iii) Special Tamil graphemes : The most interesting palaeographical feature of the Tamil-Brahmi script is the origin and the evolution of the four graphemes, special to Tamil, viz., *zh, lh, t* and *n*. The accompanying figures (Figs. 2 to 5) illustrate them. It will be seen that in each case the new grapheme has been formed by a process of simple adaptation from the corresponding Brahmi grapheme with the *nearest* phonetic value. Thus, we have *zh* from *d, lh* from *l, t* from *T* and *n* from *nh*. These results are important in two ways. To the students of linguistics, the method of formation of these letters provides fresh data on their early phonetic affinities. The evolution of these letters also provides us with a method of arranging the inscriptions in a relative chronological order.

Evolution of Tamil-Brahmi script into Vatteluttu.—One of the most important results of the present study is the clearing up of the mystery surrounding the origin of the Vatteluttu script. It is now seen that the Tamil-Brahmi script, which was created in the Pandyan country by a deliberate and conscious modification of the Brahmi script to the Tamil phonetic system, had a continuous evolution, until it became, by imperceptible stages, the Vatteluttu script some time

early in the 7th Century A.D. The course of the evolution was determined by the materials used in writing, viz., the palm leaf and the iron stylus, making the script more and more ' rounded '. The epigraphs at Tirunathakkunram (No. 76) and Pillayarpatti (No. 75) clearly illustrate the transition from Tamil-Brahmi to Vatteluttu. There is of course no sharp dividing line between the two stages of the script. We may draw a line for the sake of convenience at the commencement of the Pallava rule in the Tamil country (C. 600 A.D.).

The Script : Orthography

Different systems of Orthography.—The Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions have defied the earlier attempts at decipherment mainly because the remarkable orthographical peculiarities of the script, particularly in its earlier stages, were not fully understood. Even such simple Tamil words like *kal* (stone), *makan* (son) and *maNi-y* (gem) were lost in the readings of *kaala* (No. 29), *maakaana* (No. 13) and *maNiya* (No. 72) respectively because the rules of the notational system of the Brahmi script were indiscriminately applied to the Tamil-Brahmi script. The basic finding of the present study is that the orthographical system of the Tamil-Brahmi script differs materially from that of the Brahmi script and is in fact a deliberate modification to suit the needs of the Tamil phonetic system.

The Brahmi notational system.—The Brahmi script is a syllabary in which each *akshara* is an open syllable, either a vowel or ending in one (except *anusvara*). A basic consonant being phonetically silent was not regarded as an *akshara*, and could not therefore stand alone. These basic principles resulted in a system of writing in which,

(i) A consonantal symbol is invested with an inherent *a* medial vowel ;

(ii) The notational system of the medial vowels commenced only with the *aa* medial, since *a* was inherent in a consonantal symbol and did not require a separate medial sign ;

(iii) A basic consonant cannot be represented except as part of a *samyuktakshara*.

(iv) A *samyuktakshara* being an open syllable, cannot depict a basic consonant in the final position. (This however caused no inconvenience as the Prakrt languages recorded in the Brahmi script did not have any basic consonant except *m* in the final position)[11].

Unsuitability of Brahmi system to Tamil writing.—The unsuitability of the Brahmi notational system for writing down Tamil will be obvious to any student of that language. The Tamil language abounds with words ending in basic consonants (*e.g. kaN, maram, thaay, nhiir, kal, yaazh, nhaalh, avan* etc.). Secondly, Tamil abhors consonantal clusters and seldom permits more than two consonants together, which are in the majority of cases, either paired consonants or consonants preceded by their homorganic nasals. Therefore Tamil has no use for the *samyuktakshara* system.

The Tamil-Brahmi notational system.—Those who were responsible for the adaptation of the Brahmi script to the Tamil phonetic system must also have decided to modify the Brahmi orthographical system to suit Tamil phonetics. The principle thus introduced deserves to be recognised as one of the greatest conceptual advances in the history of the Indian systems of writing. The Brahmi principle of the inherent *a* was given up and a consonantal symbol was treated as the basic consonant. This simple but original modification enabled the Tamil-Brahmi script to depict the basic consonants in the final positions and to avoid the *samyuktaksharas* altogether. The use of a medial sign for the medial *a* vowel follows as the natural corrolary to the abandoning of the principle of the inherent *a* in a consonantal symbol.

Position of the Bhattiprolu script.—In 1892 Alexander Rea discovered three relic stone caskets from a Buddhist stupa at Bhattiprolu, a village in the Krishna District in Andhra. Nine inscriptions are found on the caskets, engraved partly on the circular tops and partly on the lower rims. Buhler edited the inscriptions in a masterly paper[12] in which he elucidated the orthographical peculiarities of the script

with rate insight. He pointed out that the adoption of the *aa* medial sign for the *a* medial vowel and the invention of a special *aa* medial sign meant that the consonantal symbol should be treated as basic. He expressed the view that the modifications were made for the purpose of avoiding ligatures. The Bhattiprolu script remained as an epigraphical curio until the discovery of the Tamil-Brahmi script. We can now see that the system of notation of medial vowels found at Bhattiprolu is that of the Tamil-Brahmi script. It is possible to conclude definitely that the system originated in the Tamil country and its use on the Bhattiprolu caskets (possibly by a Southern scribe) was freakish because,

(*a*) The Bhattiprolu inscriptions are in Prakrt which does not require the use of this system; and

(*b*) The Bhattiprolu texts (being in Prakrt) do not contain even a single example of a basic consonant in the final position, which is the *raison d'etre* of the modified notation.

The presence of two different medial signs for *a* and *aa* medial vowels in the Bhattiprolu script as against a single sign for both in the Tamil-Brahmi script perhaps indicates a later date for the Bhattiprolu script.

Orthographical evolution of the Tamil-Brahmi script.—A careful analysis of the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions reveals the existence of two notational systems for depicting basic consonants and medial vowels, which can be shown, on paleographic and linguistic considerations, to belong to two successive periods, though there is some overlapping as is only to be expected in a continuous evolution. The basic features of the two systems are enumerated below :

(A) THE EARLIER SYSTEM :

(i) A consonantal symbol is treated as a basic consonant ;

(ii) The *a* medial vowel is denoted by a medial sign ;

(iii) The *a* and *aa* medial signs are however identical and can be distinguished only from the context.

The Mangulam Grants of NheTunjcezhiyan (No. 1 & 2) illustrate the earlier system.

(B) THE LATER SYSTEM :

(i) The consonantal symbol is either basic or with the inherent *a*, depending on the context ; and

(ii) the medial *a* sign goes out of use and this medial sign represents the medial *aa* vowel only.

The Pukalur Grants of Aathan Cel-l-irumpotai (No. 56 & 57) illustrate the later system.

The earlier system with its denial of the inherent *a* in the consonantal symbol was too radical a departure from all the other systems of Indian writing which employed (and still continue to employ) the principle of the inherent *a* in a consonant. Influence from the neighbouring regions, particularly Andhra and Ceylon, must have brought about the partial acceptance of the principle of the inherent *a* in the later period. The present evidence indicates that this change-over had occured during Arikamedu period (C. 1 Cent. A.D.).

The pulhlhi.—Though it falls outside the scope of this study, we may notice in passing that the Tamil script evolved a third system of consonantal notation with the invention of the *pulhlhi*, a logical development from the second system in which there was confusion between a basic consonant and the consonant with the inherent *a* medial vowel. The *pulhlhi* does not occur in the cave inscriptions.

Chronology of the Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions

Basis for Classification.—One of the important results of the present study is the determination of the chronology of the Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions, both relative and absolute. The relative chronology is established by an internal analysis of the inscriptions of the basis of their palæographical, orthographical and linguistic features. Absolute chronology is then arrived at by linking the various stages in the evolution of Tamil-Brahmi with prominent epigraphical and historical landmarks whose dates are already known.

Summary of Classification.—The results thus obtained are summarised in the following table :

CHRONOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE TAMIL-BRAHMI INSCRIPTIONS

S. No.	*Period*	*Description and type-sites*	*Approximate dates*
O.	Pre-Tamil-Brahmi Period	Southern Rock-Edicts of Asoka at Brahmagiri, Siddhapura, etc.	3 Cent. B.C.
I.	Early Tamil-Brahmi Period	Bhattiprolu Casket Inscriptions and the orthographically related group of early Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions at Mangulam, etc.	2–1 Cent. B.C.
II.	Middle Tamil-Brahmi Period	Arikamedu graffiti and the related group of Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions at Anaimalai, etc.	1–2 Cent. A.D.
III.	Late Tamil-Brahmi Period	The Chera Inscriptions at Pukalur and later Inscriptions from Araccalur, etc.	3–4 Cent. A.D.
IV.	Transitional Period	Transitional Tamil-Brahmi (Proto-vatteluttu) Inscriptions at Pillayarpatti and Tirunatharkunram.	5–6 Cent. A.D.
V.	Early Vatteluttu-Tamil Period	Earliest Vatteluttu and Tamil Inscriptions at Anaimalai, Cittannavacal, etc.	7–8 Cent. A.D.

NOTE.—*Vide* Appendix to the Corpus for the full chronological classification of the sites.

Early Tamil-Brahmi Period (2-1 Cent. B.C.).—The virtual identity between the earliest forms of the common letters between the Asokan and Tamil-Brahmi script and the Buddist context of the Tamil cave inscriptions make it probable that the Brahmi script reached the Tamil country during the reign of Asoka (272–232 B.C.) and became

adapted to the Tamil phonetic system shortly thereafter, that is sometime in the Second Century B.C. The characteristic orthographical features of the earlier Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions (the absence of the inherent *a* medial vowel in the consonantal symbol and the use of the *aa* medial sign for the *a* medial vowel) are unknown to the Arikamedu graffiti (1 Cent. A.D.) but shared by the Bhattiprolu casket inscriptions dated in C. 200 B.C. by Buhler. Palaeographic evidence, viz., the use of the circular *zha*, the archaic forms of *t* etc., also indicates an earlier date than for the Arikamedu graffiti. The earlier inscriptions also exhibit archaic linguistic features not found in the later inscriptions viz., the genetive suffix *-a*, use of the non-Tamil sounds *dh* and *s*, and earlier verbal forms like *cey-a* (No. 13) *koTi-oor* (No. 6), etc. The first 50 inscriptions included in the *Corpus* may be classified as belonging to the Early Period on the basis of the characteristics summarised above.

Middle Period (1-2 Cent. A.D.).—An Indo-Roman Trading Station was brought to light by excavations carried out by Mortimer Wheeler in 1945 at Arikamedu near Pondicherry on the east coast of the Tamil country. The excavations have yielded about a score of inscribed potsherds. These graffiti in Tamil and Prakrt, while few in number, are of outstanding importance as they have been securely dated by stratigraphy and Roman artefacts in the first two Centuries A.D. The Arikamedu graffiti are in fact the sheet-anchor of the chronology of the Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions. A close examination of the graffiti reveals that their orthography is strikingly different from that of the earlier cave inscriptions. The discontinuance of the medial *a* sign, the use of the consonatal symbol with dual value (as basic or with inherent *a*) and the doubling of the consonants with normal frequency are the most telling features of these records. The cave inscriptions at Anaimalai, etc., belong to this period.

Late Tamil-Brahmi Period (3-4 Cent. A.D.).—The important group of Chera inscriptions at Pukalur mark a distinct stage in the development of Tamil-Brahmi. On palaeographical grounds, the Pukalur epigraphs can be dated about a century later than the end of the Arikamedu period that is in C. 200 A.D. The inscriptions at Mamandur and Araccalur are still later and can be placed in C. 300 A.D.

There is a rapid palæographic evolution during this period, evidencing literary activity. Prakrt words are increasingly Tamilised [*e.g.* *amaNNan*, *Kaayapan* (No. 56), etc.] and non-Tamil sounds are totally absent. The language moves closer to the classical usage. The genetive suffix *-a* and the paragoges *-i* and *-iy* disappear. Late verbal forms like *ceyithaan* (No. 71) and *PaNviththaan* (No. 72) appear.

Transitional Period (5-6 Cent. A.D.).—The two inscriptions at Pillayarpatti and Tirunatharkunram stand in a category of their own. They are in a transitional script which can be called either late Tamil-Brahmi or proto-Vatteluttu. These inscriptions furnish the missing links between the Tamil-Brahmi and the Vatteluttu scripts. They can therefore be assigned to the 5th and 6th Centuries A.D., that is, to the period immediately before the earliest Vatteluttu and Tamil Inscriptions known to us.

GRAMMAR OF THE TAMIL-BRAHMI INSCRIPTIONS

Phonology

Phonemic Inventory.—The phonemic inventory of the language of the cave inscriptions is depicted below :

VOWELS

		Front		Middle		Back	
		S	L	S	L	S	L
High	..	i	ii			u	uu
Middle	..	e	ee			o	oo
Low	..			a	aa		

CONSONANTS

		Plosives	Nasals	Laterals	Fricatives	Semi-vowels
Velar	..	k	ng			
Palatal	..	c	ñj			y
Retroflex	..	T	N	lh	zh	
Alveolar	..	t	n	l		
Dental	..	th	nh		r	
Labial	..	p	m			v

Vowels.—There are ten vowels, viz., *a, i, u, e, o* and their length. The diphthong *ai* occurs only in the final position in the Early Period. Even in the later inscriptions, it occurs only twice in the initial position in *-aiyan* (No. 51) and *aimpath(u-)* (No. 76). Words which would end in *-ai* in literary Tamil have sometimes *a* in the final position in these inscriptions, e.g., *mathira* (No. 20), *kuta* and *koTala* (No. 11). Hence we may conclude that *ai* did not occur in Early Tamil and was formed later as a compound of *a+i* and can, in every case, be replaced by *ay*. The diphthong *au* does not at all occur in these inscriptions and seems to have entered the language only in the subsequent period.

Vowel length phonemic.—The length of vowels is phonemic. This is clear in the cases of *aa, ii* and *uu* which have separate symbols. *ee* and *oo* do not have separate symbols ; but their length can be inferred from contrasts like,

velh : white (No. 3) ; *veelh* : a caste name (No. 25).

Pon : gold (No. 30) ; *veepoon* : one who caused (the roof) to be thatched (No. 12).

Distribution of vowels.—All the vowels occur in the initial position except *o*, the omission of which does not appear to be significant. All the vowels occur in the medial positions also. The vowels *ii, e* and *o* do not occur in the final positions.

Vowel-clusters.—A distinctive feature of the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions is the abundance of the vowel-clusters, though the glides *y* and *v* also occur from the earliest stage. The following 13 types of vowel-clusters are found in these inscriptions :

a-a, a-uu, aa-i, i-a, i-i, i-uu, i-oo,
u-a, u-i, u-uu, e-i, ai-a and
ai-uu.

Special mention should be made of the two clusters of three vowels each :

iravi-i-a :	of Iravi-i (No. 32)	(male personal names)
elha-a-aTan : i.e.,	Ilhava ATan (No. 43)	

Vowel-changes.—The following three types of vowel-changes occur :

(i) *a* > *e* : *canhthan* (No. 22) > *cenhtha(n)* (No. 21)
(a male personal name)

(ii) *i* > *e* : *ilha-* (No. 2 and 27) > *elha-* (No. 38 and 48)
(young)

(iii) *o* > *u* : *koTu* (No. 3 and 10) > *kuTu* (No. 29 and 42)
(to give)

Lengthening of u.—In the earlier inscriptions, *u* exhibits a peculiar tendency to get lengthened into *uu*. In many of these cases, modern Tamil orthography would required not only the shortening of *uu* into *u*, but also the doubling of the following consonant :

(*e.g.*) *uupu* for *uppu* (salt) (No. 34)

uupaaca-an for *upaaca(k)an* (a lay devotee) (No. 10)

uutai (No. 8) for *utai* (about) (No. 56)

koTuupithoon for *koTuppithihoon* (one who caused to be given) (No. 5)

hiatus.—A full vowel is used after a consonant to indicate a hiatus or perhaps glottal stop in speech. In later Tamil orthography, the consonant would be doubled for this purpose.

(*e.g.*) *velh-atai* = *velh-lh-atai* (not, *velhatai*) (a place-name) (No. 3 and 5)

identity of i *and* y.—A remarkable orthographic feature of the earlier Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions is the virtual identity of *y* and *i* (and also with *iy* and *yi*)—all of which seem to have the phonetic value of only *i*. *y* therefore tends to get elided with a preceding vowel *i*. These results are deduced by a comparison of alterant form like the following :

(i) *kaNi-y* (No. 1) ; *kaNi-i* (No. 3) and *kaNi* (No. 32) } a male personal name.

(ii) *Palhi-iy* (No. 1); *Palhi-y* (No. 2) } monastery; *Palhlhi* in
Palhi-i (No. 9) and *Palhi* (No. 59) } later Tamil.

(iii) *ce-i-a* (No. 2) and *ce-y-a* (No. 13) { Rel. Past. pple of *cey*, to do.

(iv) *ari-y-thi* (No. 18) and *arithi* (No. 28) . . a male personal name.

The alternation between *i* and *y* in the final position is referred to in *Thol., ezhu.*, 58. The inscriptional evidence indicates that *y* was not perhaps a separate phoneme in Early Tamil.

Consonants.—All the 18 consonants of literary Tamil are found in the inscriptions. Not all of them however occur as phonemes. *ng* and *nj* occur only as positional variants of *m* before their respective homorganic nasals. *y* has become a phoneme at least by the Late Period as evidence by the word *yaattuur* (No. 56). *nh* and *n* must have been separate phonemes as shown by the fact that it was found necessary to invent *n* in Tamil by an adaptation of *nh*. However no contrast is available for the pair. We may thus count 16 consonantal phonemes in the inscriptions. *Aaytham* does not occur in the Tamil-Brahmi script.

NON-TAMIL PHONEMES:

Two more consonants *dh* and *s* occur in Prakrt loan-words in the early inscriptions. *dh* occurs twice at Mangulam in *dham(m)am* (No. 1 and 2). *s* occurs 9 times in the early inscriptions, but later becomes *c* or *y*, as in

kaasapan (No. 41) > *kaayapan* (No. 56)
(a male personal name)

(aa)siriyk(a) (No.2 and 3) > *ācirikar* (No. 76)
(a monk; teacher) LT. *aaciriya*.

The evidence shows that it is an exaggeration to speak of the phonemic structure of the inscriptions as 'hybridised'. The occurrence of the non-Tamil phonemes is in tact minimal—very much less than in the medieval Tamil inscriptions.

Distribution of consonants.—The distribution of consonants is as under :

k-	-k-	-kk-		-ngk-		
c-	-c-			-njc-		
	-T-	-TT-	-N-	-NT-	-NN-	-N
	-t-	-tt-	-n-	-nt-	-nn-	-n
th-	-th-	-thth-	nh-	-nhth-		
			-nh-			
p-	-p-		m-	-mp-	-mm-	-m
			-m-			
y-	-y-					-y
	-r-					-r
	-l-	-ll-				-l
v-	-v-					
	-zh-					-zh
	-lh-					-lh

Restrictions on occurrence of consonants.—Only 8 consonants occur initially, viz., *k*, *c*, *th*, *nh*, *p*, *m*, *y* and *v*. Only 8 consonants are found in the final position, viz., *N*, *m*, *y*, *r*, *l*, *zh*, *lh*, and *n*. It is noteworthy that the restrictions on the occurrence of the consonants in the initial and final positions are the same as in literary Tamil. In particular, none of the six stops occur in the final position ; and *T*, *t*, *r* and *l* never occur initially. This pattern is conclusive evidence that the language of the inscriptions is Tamil. It is also remarkable that the inscriptions generally observe the restrictions on the occurrence of the initial consonants only with certain vowels as prescribed in the *Tholkaappiyam*. Thus *y* comes only with *aa*. *yaattuur*, in (No. 56) *v* does not occur with *u*, *uu*, *o* or *oo*. *c* however occurs with *a* in three Tamil words, all of them male personal names, in *canhthan* (No. 22), *cazhiyan* (No. 1 and 2) and *caTikan* (No. 2). The vowel *a* in the first two becomes *e* in literary Tamil. Non-Tamil words like *cayan* (No. 51) and *caiyalhan* (No. 52) are not taken into account here.

Consonant clusters.—The only types of consonantal clusters found in the inscriptions are geminates and nasal-plosive clusters. These are listed in the chart above (Para 9.11). In addition to these, *-vv-* occurs in a graffito from Arikamedu (*thevvathaththai*, AK. 19). *-cc-*

-pp- and *-lhlh-* can be reconstructed from the words *thac(c)an*, stone-mason (No. 71) ; *uup(p)u*, salt (No. 34) and *palh(lh)i*, monastery (No. 59 etc.). It is noteworthy that *r* and *zh* are not doubled.

Is length of consonants phonemic ?—In the earlier inscriptions, long consonants are very sparingly used (e.g.) *maththirai-y* (No. 30), *vazhuththi-y* (No. 1), *koTTuupiththa-a* (No. 1) etc. However, the doubling of consonants was discontinued later, perhaps under the influence of Sinhala and Prakrt orthography. The paired consonants reappear from the Arikamedu Period and thereafter occur with normal frequency. The evidence is not clear whether length of consonant was phonemic in early Tamil.

Consonantal changes.—

(i) The nasal *N* alternates with the lateral *lh* in *veenh* (No. 29) > *veelh* (No. 25) ; a caste name.

(ii) *zh* alternates with *T* as in *kazhu* (No. 39) and *KaTu* (No. 56 and 57) : fierce.

(iii) nasals are occasionally dropped, as in *Peru ParaNan* (No. 75), a pers name ; *kanjcaNam* (No. 29) > *kacaNa* (No. 46) ; a (rock-) bed. *KaNi-y Nanhtha* (No. 1) > *KaNi-i Natha* (No. 3) ; a personal name. *anhthai* (No. 18) > *athai* (No. 23) ; a male honorific.

(iv) *k* becomes *a* or zero, as in *makan* (No. 56) > *-maan* (as in *KaNi-maan* ; No. 71) : a personal name.

Pkt. *upaasaka* > *upaaca-an* (No. 10) > *upaacan* (No. 8) : a lay devotee.

(v) The change of *s* into *c* or *y* has already been noticed.

(vi) A very interesting consonatal change is the alteration of *n* into *nh* when doubled in *sandhi*. In literary Tamil, we have *in+icai=in-n-icai* (sweet music). The rule followed in Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions is different :

kiiran + *ooti* = *kiiran-nh-ooti* (No. 59) : a composite male personal name.

PonvaaNikan + *Aththi* = *PonvaaNikan-nh-aththi* (No. 66) : a composite male personal name.

Absence of voiced plosives.—The fact that the symbols for the voiced plosives were not borrowed from the Brahmi script, though available, should be interpreted to mean that Tamil did not have voiced plosive sounds at that time. Occurrence of forms like *Maththirai* (No. 30) for *Mathirai*, *vazhuththi* (No. 1) for *vazhuthi* and *koTTuupithoon* (No. 7) for *koTuppiththoon* confirms this supposition.

Morphology

Verbs.—All the verbal forms in the cave inscriptions without exception are in Tamil and lend themselves to analysis on the basis of the grammatical rules of *Tholkaappiyam*.

Verbal roots.—The following 10 roots occur in different verbal forms :

atu :	to cut (No. 56) (DED. 266).
aaku :	to become (No. 56) ; to make (No. 47 (DED. 282).
ku-il :	to plait, abraid (No. 11) (DED. 1469).
koTu (*koTuu*, *koTTuu*, *kuTu*)	to give (No. 1, 3 to 10 etc.) (DED. 1708).
cey (*ce-i*, *ceyi*) *:*	to make (No. 2, 13, 59 etc.) (DED. 1628).
thaa :	to give (No. 71) (DED. 2526).
nhool :	to observe penance (No. 76) (DED. 3147).
paN	to make (No. 72) (DED. 3209).
pita :	to be born (No. 27) (DED. 3622).
vee :	to thatch (No. 12) (DED. 4552) (literary Tamil : *veey*).

Many more verbal roots can be recognized in the verbal nouns occurring in the inscriptions. Only a few examples are given below :

iru : to be seated (DED. 407) > *irukai :* seat (No. 47).

utai : to reside (DED. 608) > *utai :* abode (No. 56).

kavi : to overshade (DED. 1024) > *kaavi-y :* (rock-) shelter ; cavern (No. 52).

kol : to work on metals (DED. 1773) > *kolavan :* a smith (No. 30).

Causal and non-causal forms.—Verbs frequently occur in the causal form formed by the addition of *-pi* to the root.

(*e.g.*)	*atupitha :*	caused to be cut (No. 57).
	kuTupitha :	caused to be given (No. 29).
	ceyipitha :	caused to be made (No. 59).
	veepoon :	one who caused (the roof) to be thatched (No. 12).

The causal particle *vi* occurs only once in a very late inscription, indicating that it is a later development :

paNviththaan : one who caused to be made (No. 72).

Transitive and Intransitive forms.—A comparison of ***aaka :*** having become (No. 56, 57) and *aak-iya :* having made (No. 47), shows that the same root *aak-u* can come in the transitive and the intransitive senses. It is however doubtful whether the form *aakku* can be inferred from the latter term. The formation of transitive (ergative) forms by the lengthening of the plosive and dropping of the preceding nasal was perhaps a later development.

Non-finite verbal forms : Relative past participle.—This is the most common verbal form occurring in the inscriptions and forms the base for the formation of the finite verbs. The participal form is formed from the root (or the causal form of the root) by the addition of past tense sign *th* or *i* followed by the suffix *-a*. Thus we have,

atu+thth+a	=	*atuththa*, cut (No. 56).
atu+pi+th+a	=	*atupitha*, caused to be cut (No. 57).
aaku+i+y+a	=	*aak-iya*, made (No. 47).

In the forms *ce-iya* (No. 2) and *cey-a* (No. 13) we should treat *cei* or *cey* as the root (rather than *ce*) and assume that the past tense particle *i* has got elided with the preceding *i* or *y*. These forms should be compared with the literary form *ceyiya*. The alternative form *ceytha* also occurs (No. 27).

The root *koTu* (*kuTu*) takes the suffix *th* in the causal participle and the suffix *i* in the active participle forms thus :

kuTu-pi+th+a	=	*kuTupitha* (No. 29).
koTu+i	=	*koTi*, as in

koTi-y-a-v-an, he who gave (No. 4).
koTi-oor, they who gave (No. 6).

The form *koTi* itself occurs in No. 9, as the equivalent of *koTi-y-a-* (No. 4), the literary form being *koTii-i-y-a*.

Infinitive.—The only other non-finite verbal form occurring in the inscriptions is the infinitive *aaka* (No. 56 and 57), having become.

Finite verbs.—Finite verbs are formed from the relative past participle forms by the addition of the pronominal terminations *oon/oor* and *an/ar* with or without the glides *y* and *v*. The finite verbs thus formed are hard to distinguish from the participle nouns. Examples are,

koTu-pi-th-oon :	one who caused to be given (No. 3).
koTi-y-a-v-an :	he who gave (No. 4).
koTi-oor :	they who gave (No. 16).
ku-i-thth-a-v-an :	one who plaited (the thatch for the roof) (No. 11).
vee-p-oon :	one who caused (the roof) to be thatched (No. 12).
ceyithaan :	one who caused to be made (No. 71)
paNviththaan :	one who caused to be made (No. 72).

The first four examples can be taken as verbs and the last two perhaps as nouns from the syntax of their respective sentences, whereas the position would be *vice versa* in Modern Tamil.

Tense.—All the verbal forms are in the past tense. The use of the preterite particles *th* and *i* has been already illustrated (Para 10.5).

Special usages in verbs : koTu.—It is interesting to note that the verb *koTu*, to give, is employed, in accordance with the rules in the Tholkaappiam (*col.* 30 ; 447) only in the Third Person and in relation to gifts to elders (that is, the monks).

thanhtha : is used in the sense 'seized' or 'taken' in No. 71. Though this usage is recognised in literary Tamil, its etymology has been a puzzle, since *thanhtha* should mean 'given' and not 'taken'. I suggest that a solution to this apparent contradiction

lies in a re-interpretation of *Thol. col.* 29 which restricts the usage of *thaa* to the First and Second Persons. In this rule, '*thanmai*' should be taken to include, besides First Person, reflexive usage also. Thus *Theen-uur thanhtha koon* (No. 71) means 'the chieftain who gave (unto himself) (*i.e.*, seized) *Theen-uur*'.

Pronouns : First Person.—The First Person Singular pronominal termination *-en* seems to occur in *athan-en* (that is, *I, Athan*) (No. 11). The First Person plural occurs in the oblique form *-em* in *em uur*, our village (No. 17).

Second Person.—No examples are available.

Third Person.—The masculine singular *avan* (No. 40) and the epicene plural *avar* (No. 42) occur. The pronominal terminations in the Third Person viz., *oon/oor*, and *an/ar* have already been noticed.

The non-human forms occur in *itha* (No. 2) (*iththa*, in (No. 1) : this (Lit. Tam. *ithu*) and *iva* (No. 55) : these (Lit. Tam. *ivai*). *iththa* also occurs in the accusative (Lit. Tam. *ithai*) in (No. 12). *Iththa-a* in (No. 1) is perhaps the equivalent of *ithu+a* (*inhtha* in Modern Tamil), though it is separated from the noun it qualifies.

It is very interesting to note the occurrence of the rare demonstrative Pronoun *uv-an, u-an* and *uva(n)* in the Mangulam inscriptions (No. 1 to 3). These are suffixed to the nouns in the same way as *-avan* in the medieval inscriptions.

Numerals :

muuntu :	three (No. 65).
nhaallu :	four (No. 47).
eezhu :	seven (No. 72).
aimpaththeezh(u-) :	fifty seven (No. 76).
nhutu :	one hundred (No. 46).

Nouns : Case-endings.—The genetive case-ending *-a* is one of the distinctive features of the earlier inscriptions. It is important to note that this case-ending is not necessarily followed by a neuter plural noun as required by the later grammarians. Thus we have

kaazhithika anhthai-a suthan: 'The son of *kaazhithika anhthai*' (No. 3). *-in* also occurs as a genitive case-ending :

(*e.g.*) *arithin palhi :* The *palhlhi* of Arithi (No. 28).

Saapamithaa-in : of *Saapamithaa* (No. 36).

ku and *ke* occur as dative case-endings, the latter being employed for emphasis.

(*e.g.*) *ithen ku* (No. 27) ; *maa thavirai ke* (No. 33).

Particles.—*-athu* (*-aththu* in lit. Tamil) is added as a suffix after non-human names ending in *-am*.

(*e.g.*) *nhikamathu :* of the mercantile guild (No. 3).
nhikama-th-oor : members of the mercantile guild (No. 6).
-ththi : added as a suffix for feminine nouns.

(*e.g.*) *pamiththi :* a nun (No. 36). (fem. of *pamman*, a monk).

Paragogic suffixes.—A distinctive feature of the language of the inscriptions is the addition of *-i*, *-iy* or *-y* as the paragogic suffixes for nouns ending in *-i* or *ai*.

(*e.g.*) *kaNi-i* (No. 3), *kaavithi-iy* (No. 3).
thanhthai-y (No. 2), *maNi-y* (No. 72).

Lexical Analysis

The Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions are a treasure-trove of ancient Tamil words and usages, some of which seem to have become obsolete even by the time of the extant Sangam anthologies. A prime example is the word *anhthai* (No. 3, 13, 18-24 etc.). From the context it is clear that *anhthai* is a honorific for an elder male person of age, seniority or status. It is in fact the primary kinship term from which *thanhthai*, *enhthai*, etc., have been formed with the addition of pronominal possessive prefixes.[13] *anhthai* is also used as a honorific suffix in such compounds like *kottanhthai* (No. 65) which should not be split up as *kottan* +*thanhthai* as suggested by the medieval commentators.[14] A fuller lexical analysis have been attempted by me in the *Index verborum* to the *Corpus*, to be published shortly.

Words of Prakrt orgin.— The vocabulary of the inscriptions contain some nouns of Prakrt origin. These are mostly proper names (*e.g.*) *kaasapan* (No. 41); *saapamithaa* (No. 36); or religious terms, (*e.g.*) *athiTTaanam* (No. 61 and 62), *amaNNan* (No. 56), *upaaca-an* (No. 9 and 10) etc. The only other category of Prakrt words consists of the two kinship terms *saalakan* (No. 2) brother-in-law, and *sutan* (No. 3), son, both used in the earliest inscriptions. The Prakrt element in the inscriptions has been greatly exaggereated, owing to the earlier misreadings and misinterpretations. There are only about 30 words of Prakrt origin in the inscriptions included in the *Corpus*. Direct borrowing from Sanskrit occurs for the first time (*canhthira* < *candra*) only in the *Thirunatharkunram* inscription (No. 76) almost at the commencement of the *Vatteluttu* Period.

Chronology of the Sangam Age

As the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions represent the earliest extant specimens of written Tamil and their orthography appears rather halting and experimental, some scholars have concluded that the Sangam Tamil works which show high literary finish must belong to a much later age.[15] Other scholars have countered this view by describing the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions as a " hybrid jargon " not truly representative of the Tamil of the period.[16]

It appears to me that both these are extreme views based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the inscriptions. As the foregoing linguistic analysis shows, the inscriptions emerge in simple, intelligible Tamil, not very different in its *matrix* (that is, the phonological, morphological and lexical structure) from the Tamil of the Sangam period.

The assumption that several centuries must elapse for the full development of a written language is not necessarily correct. The religious and cultural ferment generated in the Tamil country by the Buddhist and Jaina creeds and the enormous and, perhaps, sudden increase in prosperity on account of the Indo-Roman trade must have triggered a rapid development of the written language around the turn of the Christian Era. The Chera Inscriptions at Pukalur (C. 200 A.D.) give us the names of kings and chieftains who can be identi-

fied with the heroes of some of the Sangam poems (see *infra*, section on History).

The present study leads to the following conclusions :

(i) Tamil became a written language for the first time in C. 2 Cent. B.C. by the adaptation of the Brahmi script to the Tamil phonetic system.

(ii) The orthography of written Tamil was experimental during the first two centuries of its existence. Thereafter it settled down to practically the classical system.

(iii) Once writing was introduced in the Tamil Country, it spread rapidly resulting in an efflorescence of literary activity in the early centuries of the Christian Era (C. 2-3 Centuries A.D.).

Life in Ancient Tamil Country as gleaned from the Tamil-Brahmi Cave Inscriptions

The Tamil-Brahmi Cave Inscriptions are the most ancient and authentic records of the Tamils now available to us. The inscriptions furnish valuable information on many aspects of life in the ancient Tamil Country from a period anterior to the literary age of the Sangam. This section summarises the inscriptional data on the history and political, social and economic conditions of the times.

History :

The historicity of the Kings and the Chieftains of the Tamil Sangam Age was, until recently, little more than an article of faith with the Tamil scholars and historians in the total absence of direct numismatic or epigraphical evidence for the Period. Hence the discovery of the rock inscriptions of the Chera (Irumpotai) dynasty at Pukalur and of the Pandyans at Mangulam is a great landmark in Tamil historical studies.

Cheras : The Irumpotai dynasty.—The two rock inscriptions[17] of Koo Aathan Cel-l-irumpotai (No. 56 & 57) are found engraved in a natural cavern on a hill near Pukalur about ten miles from Karur. On palæographical grounds, the inscriptions can be placed about a century later than the Arikamedu graffiti and can be dated C. 200 A.D. The epigraphs record the grant of a monastery to Ceng-kaayapan, a Jaina monk ('அமண்ணன்') by the grandson of the King Koo

Aathan Cel-l-irumpotai, on the occasion of the prince's investiture, an event specifically referred to in the epigraphs *('[இ]ளங்கோ ஆக, அறுத்த கல்')*.

The provenance of the inscriptions near Karur is significant. The occurrence of the name 'Karu-uur' in one of the contemporary Tamil-Brahmi labels (No. 66) cut on the floor of the same cavern, Ptolemy's reference to 'Korura' as the inland Chera capital and the discovery of Roman coins in and around Karur identify the modern Karur as the ancient Chera capital. The provenance of the present inscriptions is conclusive evidence that the Irumpotais, a branch of the Chera dynasty, ruled from Karur.

The genealogy of the Irumpotais for three generations as depicted in the Pukalur inscriptions is given below :

Koo Aathan Cel-l-irumpotai
|
Perung-kaTung-koon
|
KaTung-koon Ilhang-kaTung-koo

Fortunately, it is possible to make a positive identification[18] of the king mentioned in the inscriptions. We know of only one Irumpotai who had both the personal names *Aathan* and *Cel* (the latter occurring in the literary form *cel-v-a*, 'the prosperous one'). He is Celva-k-kaTung-Koo Vaazhi-y-aathan, the hero of the seventh decad of the *Pathittu-p-paththu*. Even if the reading *Cel* were emended as *Ceral*, the identification remains undisturbed ; for, we learn from *Putam.*, 387 that Celva-k-kaTung-koo was also known as Ceeral Aathan, the only one with that title in the Irumpotai dynasty. Thus the identification of Aathan Cel-l-irumpotai of the Pukalur Grants with Celva-k-kaTung-koo Vaazhi-y-aathan of the seventh decad of the *Pathittu-p-paththu* can hardly be doubted.

It follows from the suggested identification that Perung-kaTung-koon of the Pukalur Grants later ascended the throne as Perunj-ceeral-irumporai and his son, Ilhang-kaTung-koo ruled in his turn as Ilhanj-Ceeral-irumpotai. This supposition gains strength from the fact that these two kings are celebrated in the next two decads (the eighth and the ninth respectively) of the *Pathittu-p-paththu*. These

identifications are further corroborated by the tradition which equates Perunj-Ceeral-irumpotai with Paalai PaaTiya Perung-kaTung-koo(n) and Ilhanj-Ceeral-irumpotai with Marutham PaaTiya Ilhang-kaTung-koo.[19]

Two possible objections to the identifications suggested here may be briefly considered. Firstly, Ilhanj-Ceeral-irumpotai has been considered to be a cousin and not the son of his predecessor, Perunj-Ceeral-irumpotai.[20] This theory is however based on the improbable identification of Anthuvan Ceeral-irumpotai, the King of Karur and paternal grandfather of Perunj-Ceeral-irumpotai with Anthuvan, the chieftain of Maiyuur *('மையூர் கிழான்')* and maternal grandfather of Ilhanj-Ceeral-irumpotai. Secondly the father of Ilhanj-Ceeral-irumpotai is mentioned as KuTTuvan Irumpotai[21], whose identity with Perunj-Ceeral-irumpotai is not apparent. It is however likely that KuTTuvan has been used in this context only as a generic title applicable to the Chera princes in general.[22]

Chera feudatories : PiTTan and Kottan.—There is strong circumstantial evidence to identify PiTan and Kottan, who are mentioned in two Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions (No. 58 and 59) found near the Irumpotai Grants at Pukalur, with PiTTan and PiTTang-kottan, the famous Chera commanders celebrated in the Sangam anthologies (*Akam*, 77 and 143 ; *Putam*, 168–172).

Analysis[23] of the literary evidence relating to these chieftains has shown that :

(*a*) PiTTan and PiTTang-kottan should be considered to be two persons, father and son respectively ;

(*b*) As Kottan, the son of PiTTan, and Ezhini, the son of Athiyan are both described as the chieftains of Kuthirai-malai (*Putam*, 158 and 168), it is probable that the place was seized from Athikamaan and given to PiTTang-kottan after the sack of ThankaTuur by Perunj-Ceeral-irumpotai ;

(*c*) PiTTan was perhaps a Koocar chieftain judging from the references in *Akam*, 143 and *Putam*, 169.

It is interesting to find close accord between the literary and inscriptional evidence on all these points. We have already identified Perung-kaTung-koon of the Pukalur Grants with Perunj-Ceeral-irumpotai, the victor of ThakaTuur. The Irumpotai inscriptions and those of PiTan and Kottan occur side by side at Pukalur and are contemporaneous as shown by their common palaeography. One of the inscriptions informs us that Kottan was a son of PiTan. PiTan is described in the inscriptions as one who hailed from 'Nhalli-y-uur' (*'நல்லிய் ஊரா[ன்]'*), the name of the place resembling closely Nhalluur or Nhaaluur, the seat of the Koocars.[24]

The importance of the Pukalur Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions as the connecting link between Tamil iterature and history can hardly be exaggerated. The Pukalur inscriptions dated with the help of the Arikamedu graffiti will henceforth serve as the sheet-anchor of the Sangam chronology. The Pukalur Period is in fact the classical Tamil Sangam Age of Auvaiyaar, Kapilar and ParaNar, Athikamaan and Paari, and a host of other poets and princes who were their contemporaries.

The Pandyans : NheTunj-Cezhiyan.—The two rock inscriptions[25] of NheTunj-Cezhiyan (No. 182) found in the natural caverns on a hill at Mangulam near Madurai are the earliest known historical records in the Tamil Country. Their archaic palaeography and linguistic features indicate an earlier date than for the Arikamedu graffiti. The characteristic orthographical features of the Mangulam records are unknown to the Arikamedu graffiti but shared by the Bhattiprolu Casket Inscriptions. On these grounds the Mangulam Grants can be dated towards the close of the Second Century B.C.

The two Mangulam grants record the gift of a monastery to KaNi-y Nhanhtha who is described as an *(a)asiriyika*, perhaps a Jaina monk. The donor of one of the Grants is KaTalan Vazhuthi-y. He is referred to as the *PaNa-an* (*'பணஅன்'*) (lit., a servant, but in this context, an officer or feudatory) of '*NheTunj-Cazhiyan*'. He was also perhaps related to the Pandyans, as seen from his name *Vazhuthi*. The donor of the other Grant is *CaTikan* who claims to be the brother-in-law ('*saalakan*') of '*NheTinj-Cazhiyan*'. He was perhaps even otherwise a kinsman of the Pandyans as indicated by

his name *CaTikan* which appears to be connected with *Cazhiyan* (> *Cezhiyan*) and the later form *CaTaiyan*. Allowing for the archaic orthography of the inscriptions, there is little difficulty in recognising the name NheTunj-Cezhiyan in both the records. Though the name is not accompanied by any royal title, it is reasonable to suppose that NheTunj-Cezhiyan was the reigning Pandyan King of the day, judging from the name itself, the provenance of the records and the manner in which his name had been invoked by the donors.

There is no historical data to identify him with either of his namesakes referred to in the Sangam Works. However, considering the date of the Mangulam Grants, we can safely rule out NheTunj-Cezhiyan, the victor of Thalai-y-aalang-kaanam who ruled in c. 2-3 Cent. A.D. NheTunj-Cezhiyan, 'who overcame the Aryan armies', and in whose time the story of the *Cilappathikaaram* took place, is also perhaps too late to be considered, if he was a contemporary of Ceng-kuTTuvan. It seems probable that the NheTunj-Cezhiyan of the Mangulam Gants lived much earlier than his descendants and namesakes celebrated in the Sangam anthologies.

Kazhu (KaTu) Maatan.—One of the Azhakarmalai Cavern Inscriptions (No. 39) which can be dated c. 1 Cent. B.C., records the gift of Kazhu Maatan. '*kazhu*' is an alterant form of '*kaTu*', as the retroflex sounds *zha* and *Ta* often fell together in Tamil in this period. We have no data to identify Kazhu (KaTu) Maatan. We may however infer from his name that he was probably a Pandyan king or prince. His name may be compared with that of KaTumaan Maatan, the Pandyan king, 'who died in the Ilavanthikai-p-palhlhi '[26].

Other Chieftains : KaNi-maan 'who took Theenuur'.—The Mamandur Cavern inscription (No. 71) on the outskirts of Kanchipuram is important as marking the northern limit for the distribution of the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions and for mentioning a historical event, viz., the capture of Theenuur by a chieftain named KaNimaan. This inscription which shows such advanced palaeographical features as the 'headline' over *ka*, angular (northern) *ma*, a late form of *nha* resembling 'L' etc., cannot be assigned to a period earlier than C. 300 A.D. In the absence of literary references, we cannot identify

KaNimaan or Theenuur which he claims to have captured. The chieftain probably flourished at the end of the Tamil Sangam Age and a little before the commencement of the Pallava rule over Kanchipuram.

Peru ParaNan, the Chieftain of Eru-k-kaaTTuuru.—The Pillayarpatti Cave Inscription (No. 75) of Peru ParaNan, the Chieftain of Eru-k-kaaTTuuru, is an epigraphical landmark of great importance as it marks the transition from the Tamil-Brahmi to the VaTTezhuththu script and is the earliest Tamil inscription to occur in an artificial rock-cut shrine. The palaeography of the inscription leads to the conclusion that the epigraph and the rock-cut shrine could not be dated later than C. 500 A.D. If this dating is accepted, we get the important result that the introduction of the rock-cut architecture in the Pandya country ante-dated Mahendra Pallava at least by a century. There are no literary references to Peru ParaNan. However Eru-k-kaaTTuur appears to have been an important place as it is also referred to in a much earlier Tamil-Brahmi inscription (No. 51) from Tirupparangunram. The Sangam poet Thaayang-KaNNanaar hailed from this place which was probably in the Pandya country at or near Pillayarpatti.

Political, Social and Economic conditions of the times : Territorial Divisions.—The Tamil Country was divided into territorial units known as *nhaaTu* and *uur*, corresponding respectively to a district and a town or village. The Cittannavaacal Cavern Inscription (No. 27) refers to *EruminhaaTu*, perhaps the same as ErumainhaaTu located in the north-west of the Tamil Country (*Akam*, 115 and 253).

A number of cities and villages is mentioned in the inscriptions. Among them, the most important are :

(i) *Maththirai-y* ; *Mathira* : The capital city of the Pandyans is mentioned twice, once at Azhakarmalai (No. 30) and again at Mettupatti (No. 20). The form *Mathirai* survives even in some of the later medieval inscriptions. Mathira (Mathura) probably means a walled or fortified city (cf. DED. 3840).

(ii) *ThoNTi* : The Kilavalavu inscription mentions *ThoNTi*, which, judging from the provenance of the inscription,

probably refers to the eastern Pandyan port of that name, still surviving on the east coast in Ramanathapuram district. The term *ThoNTi* means an inlet of the sea.)

(iii) *Karu-uur* : One of the Pukalur cavern inscriptions (No. 66) refers to *Karu-uur*, the ancient Chera inland capital and seat of the Irumpotai dynasty. *Karu-uur* itself means an inland or interior place (*karu* : that which is within, inside).

Ceylon.—Ceylon is mentioned twice in these inscriptions. One of the inscriptions at Thirupparangunram (No. 51) refers to one *iizhakuTumpikan*, that is, a house-holder from Ceylon. Another inscription from Muthupatti (No. 52) mentions one *Caiy-alhan*, that is, a person of Ceylonese extraction (Pkt. *Saihala* ; Skt. *Saimhala*). The close relationship between the two countries is also attested by the points of similarities between the two regional Brahmi scripts.

Religion.—There is clear internal evidence in the inscriptions that the natural caverns with the rock-cut beds were occupied by monks as well as nuns of both the Buddhist and the Jaina religions. The Azhakarmalai inscriptions (No. 41 & 33) refer to a monk and a nun respectively as *thavira* (Skt. *Sthavira*) and *maa thavirai* (Skt. *mahaa sthaviraa*). The occurrence at Azhakarmalai of the term *pamiththi* (fem. of *pamman*) for a nun is also noteworthy (No. 36). These references prove the spread of the sthaviravaada sect of Buddhism in the Tamil Country even by the First Century B.C. The Pukalur inscriptions (No. 56 & 57) refer to an *amaNNan* (Skt. *Sramana*), a Jaina monk. It should however be noted that the vast majority of the names occurring in these inscriptions are those of the donors or lay devotees referred to as *upaaca-an* (Skt. *upaasaka*) in some of them (No. 8 to 10).

Commerce.—The trading communities vied with the royalty in the endowment of monasteries in the Tamil country, as elsewhere in India. This is fortunate, as we are able to obtain from the inscriptions much information on the state of commerce in the Tamil Country from C. Second Century B.C.

Nhikama.—We learn from the Mangulam inscriptions (No. 3 & 6) about the existence of mercantile guilds (*nhikama*) in the Tamil Country at such an early date. The head of the guild enjoyed the title *kaavithi* (No. 3). The members of the guild (*nhikamattoor*) acted in their corporate capacity in making endowments (No. 6).

Trades.—A trader is referred to as a *VaNikan.* The following trades are mentioned in the inscriptions, most of them from Azhakar-malai :

(i) ATUVAI VANIKAN (No. 43) : a cloth merchant. It is very interesting to compare his name *Atuvai VaNikan Elha-a ATan* with that of the Sangam poet Atuvai VaNikan IlhaveeTTan-aar.

(ii) UPPU ('UUPU') VANIKAN (No. 34) : a salt merchant. We learn from the Sangam works about the importance of salt trade in the Tamil Country. There is also a mention of an *u(p)patuva(n)* (No. 10), probably a salt manufacturer.

(iii) *Kozhu iVaNikan* (No. 38) : an ironmonger. 'Kozhu' which signifies the iron tip of the plough, probably meant iron implements and weapons generally.

(iv) PAANITHA VANIKAN (No. 37) : a trader in sugarcane juice, candy and perhaps toddy.

(v) PON VANIKAN (No. 66) : a trader in gold and bullion.

(vi) MaNi-y VaNNakkan (No. 72) : a dealer in or a tester of, precious gems, a lapidary. It is interesting that this reference is at Araccaluur which is very near the ancient beryl mines of Padiyur in Coimbatore district.

Occupations :

(i) THA(C)CAN (No. 71) : a stone mason or carpenter. The term is derived from the Tamil root *thai* (hence, *thaitta, thacca*), to join (as stone or wooden joinery) and not from the Sanskrit word *taksha* as suggested by the ***Tamil Lexicon.***

(ii) PON KOLAVAN (No. 30) : goldsmith. The term *Kolavan* is derived from *kol*, to work on metals (cf. *kollan*).

(iii) PAAKAN (No. 12) (from *Paakan-uur*) : a charioteer or an attendant of elephants or horses.

Society.—There is no evidence for a system of castes as such, though occupations mostly went by heredity. Clan names however do occur. We hear of *VeeN* (No. 29 & 43) and *Veelh* (No. 25) who were perhaps *Velhirs*. A *KavuTi* (No. 27) (Skt. *Gauda* ; Late Tamil *KavuNTan*) from EruminhaaTu is mentioned. The expressions *ezhai-y* (No. 28) and *razhu*[28] (the latter in an Arikamedu graffito) are probably variants of *iTai* (the shepherd community).

The use of a modified form of the Brahmi script to write Tamil, the spread of the Buddhist and the Jaina creeds and the presence of prakrt words (mostly in Tamilised forms) in the inscriptions attest to the fact that Northern religious and cultural influences had penetrated the Tamil Country even before the commencement of the period portrayed in the Tamil-Brahmi Cave Inscriptions.

TAMIL-BRAHMĪ SCRIPT

VOWELS

a ā i ī u ū e o

CONSONANTS

k ṅ c ñ ṭ ṇ t n p m

y r l v ḻ ḷ ṟ ṉ

dh j

VOWELLED CONSONANTS

ka kā ki kī ku kū ke kai ko

FIG·I

FIG-2 ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF L̤

FIG-3 ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF Ḷ

FIG-4 ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF R̤

FIG-5 ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF N̤

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22. *Vide* entries under KuTTuvan, *Sanga Ilakkiam*, 1967 ed., PP. 1386.

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